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Why are there so few French place-names in England?

DAVID TROTTER

An analysis of Anglo-Norman elements in English place-names as a result of the Norman Conquest

The Norman Conquest of 1066 has left a considerable mark on the English landscape (in the form of cathedrals, churches, and castles) and had a massive impact on the English language. Both of these are visible (and audible) today. It is well known that a very sizeable percentage of the vocabulary of Modern English is of French origin. What is generally realised less is the extent to which these are not loanwords in the conventional sense (that is, words incorporated from a foreign language) but terms taken over into English at a time of sustained language contact between English and French, when the two languages co-existed on English soil. Recent advances in lexicography, in the Oxford English Dictionary in particular, now make it possible to track much more precisely the processes which have led to this massive incursion of French terminology into English. Generally speaking, it is normally assumed that Anglo-Norman was a predominantly urban vernacular (Short, 2009), a view which some recent work has challenged (Rothwell 2008, 2009, 2012; Trotter 2012a, 2012b, 2013).

The principal manuals of the history of English assert that the transformation of the vocabulary of English took place predominantly at a literary level and affected above all courtly and more elevated registers of English. In other words, or so the received wisdom goes, French court culture, transmitted through Anglo-Norman (the variety of French in use in England), was superimposed on Anglo-Saxon (and then Middle English). It is both the result of, and itself evidence of, cultural, economic, and political superiority. This is a perspective which is found, for example, in a famous if mistaken passage in *Ivanhoe*, a historical novel by Sir Walter Scott, concerning Saxon words for animals and Norman words for types of meat. At

the same time, we should not overlook either the significant and perhaps surprising role of French in supplying some of the better-known English swear-words, or indeed the extent to which Anglo-Norman appears to surface in the form of words at present only preserved in English dialects. Examples I have looked at in detail elsewhere (Trotter 2012a, 2013) include *momet* ‘scarecrow’ and *maund* ‘a large two-handled basket’ (< *mande*). The former is a derivative of the French name for Mohammed (*mahomet*). *Momet* used to mean a ‘scarecrow’ but only in England and in parts of southern France, which cannot plausibly have supplied the meaning to Anglo-Norman. *Maund* displays a typically Anglo-Norman form (-*aun-* for French -*an-*), and the English dialectal pronunciations only make sense if the word came from Anglo-Norman. The ‘scarecrow’ sense of *mahomet* is not attested in Anglo-Norman itself. These are everyday words which may well have



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been orally transmitted (that, or we simply lack the documentary evidence for their existence in written Anglo-Norman). In short, it would appear that the role and influence of Anglo-Norman in the history of English were rather more complicated than that of simply supplying an array of elegant and socially prestigious words.

However, there is one area in which it seems that the Anglo-Normans were rather less influential. That is in place-names. Notwithstanding a fairly small number of such names which are clearly of Anglo-Norman origin, such as *Rougemont Castle* in Exeter, built by William the Conqueror, or *Beaulieu*, or *Beachy Head* (from *beau chef*: *beau chef* 1274, see VEPN 3,41¹), the Anglo-Norman contribution to English place-names is relatively limited. There is no evidence of anything approaching, for example, the enormous number of names in *-by* which allow us to observe and to map Scandinavian influence and settlement. A probable inference is that the Normans, upon their arrival in England, found an already satisfactory set of place-names.

Domesday Book contains a number of Anglo-Norman words, and early charters of the time of William I show that Anglo-Norman words were simply turned into Latin in legal documents. The genuinely Anglo-Norman place-names in Domesday Book are few and far between. *Gulpher* and *Boulge* in Suffolk are amongst rare examples of the breed. The former appears to mean 'fox's den, earth' and is remarkable because this word, a derivative of the Medieval French term for 'fox', *goupil* (from Latin *vulpicula*), is not attested anywhere in Medieval French, except in place-names (Gdf 4,319c). In fact, Medieval French *goupil* gave way to *renard*, from the well-known romance about Reynard the fox. Dialect forms of English preserve the name *Renart* in northern England, on both sides of the Pennines, and in Western Counties such as Hereford, Shropshire, Gloucestershire, and Monmouthshire (cf. SED IV.5.11.), where in forms such as *renny*, *reynolds*, it means 'fox'. *Boulge*, also in Suffolk, is generally interpreted as a term meaning 'a piece of land covered with heather', although there are other interpretations, notably 'bag-shaped piece of land' or 'fallow or uncultivated waste land'. Whatever the meaning, though, there is little doubt that it comes from French².

In the main, though, place-names in England show very little trace of the Norman period. As a result, very little has really been written on the subject since Zachrisson (1909) and his later chapter in the introduction to the English Place-Name Society's

introductory volume (Zachrisson, 1929). In part, this probably comes about because specialists in English, place-name experts, and the dwindling band of those with a professional interest in Anglo-Norman are not as connected as they might be.

One problem which the investigation of possible Anglo-Norman elements in English place-names has to confront is that of evidence, or more precisely, the chronology of that evidence in different languages. Inevitably, ostensibly French elements in English place-names are also words which have found their way into English in other forms. There is always a distinct possibility that what looks like a place-name with an Anglo-Norman element has in fact simply used as a place-name an item of vocabulary (from Anglo-Norman) which had already been transmitted into English. Here, as in all investigations of medieval languages, we are at the mercy of the available documentation. For example, consider the etymology³ of a place-name like *Battail Holme*:

bataille 'used to indicate a space where trial by combat occurred', VEPN 1,54: *Bataylcroft* (f.n.), 1265–81 Ch; *le Batayleflat* (f.n.), 1351 Db; *Battail Holme*, 1352 Cu [land between Carlisle Castle and the river Eden], cf. PNCu 3,460; 1,45, 'le Bataillholm'; *Battle place* (s.n.), 1275 L; *Battle Street* (s.n.), XIV^e s. Cirencester, Gl; AND sub **bataille**¹; MED sub **batail(le)**, ? a1216 with sense of 'trial by combat'

The English place-name element *Holme* is preceded by the Anglo-Norman derived *bataille*. Or again, from the same part of the country, the apparently Anglo-Norman element *ermite*, 'hermit' which generates a range of Anglicised forms, not all readily recognizable now as derivatives of *ermite*, which is evidenced in the etymological note on *ermite* here:

ermite 'hermit', PNCu 3,471: *Armat Gill* (now *Swinsty Gill*); *Armathwaite*; *Hermitebec*, c.1210 Denton, Cu; PNCu 1,168: *monialibus de Ermitethwait*, 1212 = *Armathwaite* (Leath); PNCu 1,200: *Ermitthweyt*, 1272; *del Ermethwayt* (f.n.), 1342 Mansergh, We; PNCu 2,263: *Ermicetwayth* (l. *Ermitetwayth*?), 1278; *Armitethwayt*, 1292 = *Armathwaite* (Hall), Bassenthwaite Cu; PNWe 2,249 *Armaside*; OED sub **hermit**, c.1275; MED sub **heremīt(e)**, ? a1200

A contrary case is provided by those place-names which apparently contain Anglo-Norman elements, but for which the toponymic evidence is only post-medieval. This is evidenced by the

cases of *stank* and *tieis*. Both come from Anglo-Norman, but the place-names themselves are not attested at the time of the Anglo-Normans.

stank ‘pond, small lake’, (< AN *estanc*, *stanc*), cf. AND sub **estank**; PNCu 2,290, 3,492; PNWe 1,107; 2,18; 2,94; 2,134; PNWe 2,290, all attestations are post-medieval; AND sub **estank**; OED sub **stank**, 1338; MED sub **stank**, surname (‘Reginald de Stanklak’), c.1250

tieis ‘German’, PNWe 2,97 OF. *tieis* ‘German’ (cf. *Teutonic*, *tyšk*, etc.): *Teas Bridge*, *Teas Hill*, *Teas Sike*, 1859; *Tiase Close*, 1699; *Teas Clos(e)*, 1750, 1791; all attestations are post-medieval AND sub **tieis**; Ø MED, OED

Prudence dictates that all such cases, and there are many of them, should be excluded from any analysis of direct Anglo-Norman influence on the place-names of England. The vagaries of textual transmission and documentary survival also mean that even where the available evidence appears to indicate that the first attestation of an Anglo-Norman element in Medieval English is in a place-name, it is perfectly possible that this is incorrect, and that we simply lack all information on elements in the chain of transmission and contact. In other words, conclusions are only provisional, pending the discovery of more documentation.

Some other cases of place-names are perhaps clearer in the sense that we have an obviously Anglo-Norman word which appears to have contributed a place-name element in England, even if the exact form in the toponymic evidence is not otherwise attested. For example, consider the etymology of a place-name like *Cangle*. *Cangle* is almost certainly a variant form of standard French *chancel* (the variant *cancel* is typically Anglo-Norman, and the use of *k* for *c* is also common in Anglo-Norman), even if we have no Anglo-Norman examples of the spellings with –g–.

cangle ‘enclosed field’: ‘apparently a derivative (through ONFr *cangel*) of Lat. *cancellus*, ‘rail, lattice’, possibly in the sense of ‘fence, boundary’ [...], but more likely ‘fenced enclosure’ ...’: *Kanglecroft* (f.n.), XIV^e s. Hrt; *le Cangel* (f.n.), 1392 Ess; *Cangle* (f.n.), c.1300 O; *Kangel* (f.n.), 1222 Ess; *Kangles* (f.n.), 1399 Hrt; cf. AND sub **chancel**; Gdf 2,50b; TL 2,206b; FEW 2¹, 174a (the allegedly ‘ONFr’ form is absent from all dictionaries); Ø MED, OED

Other place-names, perhaps because of the degree of distortion which the original French word or form has undergone, may credibly be interpreted

as deriving (and having developed) from Anglo-Norman. River-names in –ewe are a case in point. *Ewe* is again a typical Anglo-Norman form for ‘water’ (more commonly *eau* in continental French). Its closeness to the Anglo-Saxon *ĕa* probably helps to explain how it became taken over into river-names.

ewe ‘water’ < AQUA, OF *ewe*; RN 32: *Belewe*, 1292 We; *Below* 1576, *Bellow*, 1577; now *Belah* [beilə, bi-lə], a stream which runs into the Eden west of the Pennines: the AN element *ewe* perhaps replaced AS *ĕa*, ‘running water, river’; this explanation is rejected by PNWe 1,3; RN 63: *Caldew* [kɔːdə], which rises on the northern slope of Skiddaw (north of Keswick), with the same AN suffix: ‘It should be remembered that the Caldew runs for a great part through Inglewood forest; in a forest district AN influence would not be remarkable’, PNCu 1,7: *Caldeu* 1189; *Kaldewe*, *Caldewe* 1307 Eden We; PNCu 1,131: *Caldoustanes* 1339, *Caldeu-stanes* c.1342; EPN 89 same etymology; AND sub **ewe**¹; Ø MED, OED

Here, too, there is no trace of forms in *ewe* in the dictionaries of English itself, which rather reinforces the suggestion that this component of the names is a direct transmission from Anglo-Norman. Finally, *Rounce* also appears to be a place-name element which can only have come from Anglo-Norman. It derives from *runcel/ronce*, ‘thorn-bush’, and the spelling –ou– is again especially characteristic of later Anglo-Norman.

Two things stand out from even the very small number of examples discussed here. The first is the location of the place-names themselves. My data derive mainly from an investigation of two counties in north-west England which are not normally associated with intensive or extensive Anglo-Norman influence, namely Cumberland and Westmorland (both now subsumed, since 1974, in Cumbria). This is far from the more heavily colonized South-East, and indeed large parts of Cumberland and Westmorland were and remain inaccessible and undeveloped. Secondly, it is remarkable that there are numerous examples of Anglo-French elements not in place-names (i.e. settlements) but in field-names, the most local, and probably the least well-documented type of toponym. There are many more examples of this in the volumes of the English Place-Name Society. An example (discussed elsewhere) is *close*, found in field-names and in medieval documents from Westmorland concerning Kendal and the Lyvennet valley, south of Penrith. The word is relatively unusual in both English and French (Trotter, 2012b).

In the light of the general paucity of Anglo-Norman influence on English place-names, it is surprising to find that influence surfacing in names as local and as ‘vernacular’ (in the architectural sense of the word) as field-names. Together with the evidence of the influence of the invaders’ language in English dialects, this seems to point towards a rather deeper penetration of Anglo-Norman into at least the documentary record of the English countryside than is generally assumed. It is hard to imagine that the use of Anglo-Norman for field-names would have made much sense unless the names of the pieces of land so recorded did indeed correspond to those in genuine (and thus, presumably, oral) use. In other words, this evidence suggests that we perhaps need to look again at the question of the role and extent of Anglo-Norman influence in Medieval English society. That Anglo-Norman should have found its way into English field-names in areas of the country so removed from the centres of Anglo-Norman power must surely prompt us to question whether the generally accepted view as to where Anglo-Norman was in use is a complete, or an accurate, picture.

Notes

- 1 See the bibliography for abbreviations and their decoding.
- 2 My thanks to Dr Keith Briggs, who is preparing a study of Suffolk place-names, for kindly sending me his notes on the usage and etymology of *boulge*.
- 3 The etymologies provided in this paper are usually supplied by the English Place-Name Society volumes or by EPN.

Bibliography and abbreviations

AN = Anglo-Norman
 AND = *Anglo-Norman Dictionary*, www.anglo-norman.net
 AS = Anglo-Saxon
 Ch = Cheshire
 Cu = Cumberland
 Db = Derbyshire
 Ess = Essex
 FEW = Wartburg, W. von. 1922–2002. *Französisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Bonn/Leipzig/Basel: Zbinden.
 f.n. = field-name
 Gdf = Godefroy, F. 1880–1902. *Dictionnaire de l’Ancienne Langue Française et de tous ses Dialectes du IX^e au XV^e Siècles*. Paris: Vieweg.
 Gl = Gloucestershire
 Hrt = Hertfordshire

L = Latin
 MED = *Middle English Dictionary*. Online at <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>> (Accessed January 6, 2014).
 O = Oxfordshire
 OED = *Oxford English Dictionary*. Online at <www.oed.com> (Accessed January 6, 2014).
 OF = Old French
 ONFr = Old northern French
 PNCu = Armstrong, A. M., Mawer, A., Stenton, F.M. & Dickins, B. 1950–1952. *The Place-Names of Cumberland* (English Place-Name Society, Volumes XX–XXII). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 PNWe = Smith, A. H. 1967. *The Place-Names of Westmorland* (English Place-Name Society, Volumes XLII–XLIII). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 RN = Ekwall, E. 1928. *English River-Names*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
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 s.n. = street-name
 TL = Tobler, A. & Lommatzsch, E. 1925–2002. *Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch*. Berlin/Wiesbaden: Steiner.
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 VEPN 3 = Parsons, D. 2004. *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names (CEAFOR–COCK–PIT)*. Nottingham: English Place-Name Society.
 We = Westmorland.
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